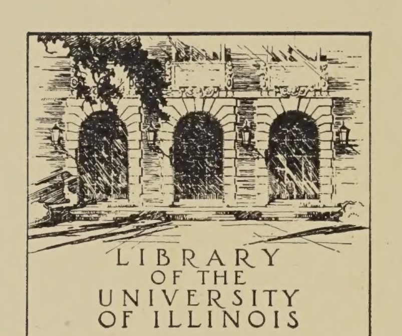
The Acropolis

FROM THE RUSSIAN
OF MEREJKOWSKI
TRANSLATED BY . .
G. A. MOUNSEY . .



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THE ACROPOLIS

I HAD long desired to visit Athens. This had been my dream during the course of many years.

And now, at last, I was travelling through Southern France into Northern Italy. Three weeks I spent in Florence; wonderful city! With its bright sunshine, pure and soft, with its mild, transparent atmosphere, of which we in Petersburg have no conception, everything in this place looks beautiful; every object however prosaic, seems to be carved in stone. The colours are not, indeed, so brilliant as they are, for instance, in Naples or Venice, being duller and more monotonous, but for this very reason the outlines of the distant hills, of the trees on the horizon, of the mediæval structures, every form and every

prominence has its own particular and essential value. One lives in this sunlight and in this atmosphere as in an undisturbed dream.

Along this bank of muddy Arno Dante Allighieri wandered, evolving his *Divine Comedy*. Every line of the lurid poem is instinct with the atmosphere of Florence, and in the ghastly scenery of Hades there glimmers, as it were, a faint reflection of this sun.

There, among the cypress trees upon the hillside, stands Villa Palmieri, where gathered, in the days of the plague in Florence, that noted company of dames and cavaliers, to tell each other tales such as those handed down to us by gay Boccaccio in his *Decameron*. And there is the mount upon whose summit stood in days gone by the observatory of Galileo. There, too, is the house of Michael Angelo Buonarotti. I enter in, to see his drawings, sketches, models. There is the public square, and there the church of Maria del Fiore; and the "Paradisal" doors of the Baptistry, cast in bronze by great Ghiberti, and the Venus of Medici . . . all this achieved

by one small nation, dwelling in one small corner of the globe. What men they were, and what a life they lived! how different from us! so much stronger were they, and so much more free.

The Pitti Palace, within whose walls are collected the finest and most graceful works of the brushes of Raphael, of Bartolomeo, Titian, Murillo, and Giorgione, is all built up of mighty slabs of stone, quite rough and quite uneven. This people so loved all that is simple and snatched straight from the arms of Nature, that they even feared to mar the primeval beauty of the stone by rounding off or smoothing down its roughnesses. Great blocks are massed on blocks, shaping steps in the groundwork of the palace: nowhere else on earth is so royal a structure to be found. Here and there from the rough grey stone jut forward heads of lions with open jaws, whence streams of water flow into marble basins. . . . The architect has spurned all scroll work, all that is artificial. Yes, to be great, indeed, one must be simple, one must be primevally sincere. One feels that

no petty tyrant built this palace, but a strong man sprung from the bosom of a mighty race. And the spirit of this race pervades the whole; for here one understands what it means to love one's *own* nation, and one sees how foolish is the hope of achieving aught apart from and outside of it.

Talent, such as Ghirlandaio's or Verocchio's—painters who paved the way for the efflorescence of Florentine art—might equally have existed in other countries and at other epochs. But nowhere else on earth could it have had such great significance as on that tiny plot of land at the foot of San Miniato, on the banks of mud-green Arno. Here alone could such a pupil as Buonarotti have come to Ghirlandaio, or Leonardo da Vinci, to Verocchio. It required the air of the Florentine workshops, the atmosphere all impregnated with the odour of the colours and with the marble dust, to enable these rare blossoms of human genius to burst forth. For many a year did the dark and flaming spirit of the indomitable race seem to torment itself in muteness, to seek an incarnation and to

fail to find one. It almost begins to dawn,—like a thin, white streak in the morning clouds—in the great, round eyes of the still Eikon-visaged and semi-Byzantine Madonnas of Cimabue, it glimmers forth in the realism of Giotto, shining, in Ghirlandaio and Verocchio, with a yet clearer light, but dies down again for a time in the religious paintings of Fra Angelico, only at last and suddenly, in a lightning flash, to illumine everything in Michael Angelo and Leonardo da Vinci. What a triumph for the nation! From this time forward the Florentine spirit has found a full expression, an indestructible form. All about her everything may be transformed, everything may be destroyed; but the Florentine Renaissance has discovered her own regeneration: she is immortal, like the Athens of Pericles, like the Rome of Augustus. In the hammered, metallic-sounding verses of Allighieri, I recognize the chisel of Donatello. And upon it all is stamped the seal of the peaceful spirit of Florence. One feels it in the minutest details of the architecture; in the splendid cast-iron gryffons, which are grafted

upon the stonework at the corners of the palace, where four cross-roads meet, holding torches to give light by night. So, too, in the distich of a Greek epigram, I recall the spirit of Homer, in the fragments of marble half hidden in moss and earth, the style of an Ionic pillar. Upon all the works of a truly great civilization, as upon its coins, is graven the image of one master. That master is the genius of the race.

The more carefully I studied the works of the Renaissance, the more clearly did I realize how impossible it was for a modern mind like mine to understand them, until I had visited Greece and beheld with my own eyes the incarnation of the ancient Grecian spirit. It seems to be the ultimate, if at times unconscious, foundation of all that is genuinely beautiful and eternal, created by the artists of modern times. There is in the Madonnas of Raphael, who counts the Greeks among his teachers, a repose, a purity of line that is entirely Greek. In the library of Lorenzo de Medici I came upon an *Aeneid* of Virgil on parchment of the sixth century, side by

with some ancient manuscripts of Dante and of Petrarch. Not without reason was Virgil the companion of Dante in the Hades of the Middle Ages. When I look at the bronze doors of the Baptistry and admire the pure, ethereal folds in the Hellenic tunics of the Old Testament women in Ghiberti's scenes from the Pentateuch of Moses, there is in them the same classic grace, the same fulness of life, and the same repose as in the nude form of Michael Angelo's young David, in his Leda, and his Bacchus. And the same reflection of the Hellenic muse glows in the verse of Dante. Everywhere in Florence is there some remembrance of it. What did this race create there, on that clod of fruitless, stony Attic soil? Why cannot the nation yet forget the age of Pericles, twenty centuries after the triumphant preaching of Christianity, twenty centuries after the overthrow of Olympus? What was there in that land? I have learnt to understand the impossibility of presenting the Hellenic spirit in any books, in any words. It must have been the same feeling, invincible and

hallowed, that was drawing me now to the Acropolis, which drew the pilgrims of the Middle Ages to Jerusalem.

In spite of all my anticipations, or perhaps in consequence of them, the Adriatic Sea made no special impression upon me, that is to say, as a sea.

It is always so, that when one at last approaches the consummation of that which has been so long and earnestly desired, one's heart is burdened by some inexplicable sadness and disillusionment. And so, confusedly, I began to fear that Athens would fail to give me what I expected of her.

The impression of the sea is incomparable with anything I know, and is always new. One cannot sufficiently admire the changefulness and constancy of the "peaceful element." Every moment it assumes new tones of colouring; it has nothing of the mountains' motionlessness of death; it is alive. And yet, at the same time, from the first day of creation even unto the last, the sea remains, as it always has been, unchangeable.

There is nothing in Nature so majestic as the

simple line of the horizon, whereon the water mingles with the sky. All other lines and forms on earth, more complex and beautiful though they may be, look insignificant beside this greatest symbol of the Infinite that is accessible to human kind.

Yet on this one occasion, I know not why, my heart remained unmoved. I sought my former impression from the sea, but found it not; I seemed to be moving rather on some gigantic geographic map. There would emerge some sky-blue islands of the Archipelago floating on the waves, only to plunge into their depths again.

Deep down in my heart I hid my doubts of Greece.

In this uncertainty, I passed from the ship to the little town of Corfu. For the first time in my life, I stood on Hellenic soil. I encountered the unpleasing looks of the inhabitants; I found dust, foul odours, stifling heat. Unknown drachmae, leptoi, and obols replaced the noble and familiar francs. At once I realized that I had quitted Europe and arrived in Asia, not in the savage Asia of

to-day, but in a half-civilized and wholly uninteresting land. The bronzed Greeks reminded me of the sellers of sponges in the bazaar at Petersburg. The sun was scorching beyond endurance. The burning white dust made me sneeze and cough, and I was only too glad to reach the open sea once more and feel the fresh salt breeze upon my face. I was told that it would be even hotter at Athens; and with still greater indifference did I look on the shores of Hellas. Zante passed us,—seductive isle. Now, as I gaze on the grey sky of Petersburg, I repeat that name with tenderness and regret. . . .

We neared the precipitous rocks of the Morea, where once was Sparta, ancient Lacedæmon. We doubled Cape Matapan of great renown, and formidable to mariners of old, the southernmost point of Europe.

"To-morrow I shall see Athens," said I to myself, as I lay down in my hammock, and soon fell asleep imperturbably indifferent.

Coming on deck, early next morning, I beheld an amphitheatre of hills and moun-

tains, delicate in outline, and jutting into the ocean. It was the coast of Attica.

I looked through my telescope and directed my gaze to a sharply defined hill-top that seemed to rise out of the ocean itself. Upon its summit there glittered something indistinctly.

An Austrian standing by me ejaculated: "The Acropolis."

My heart bounded within me for the first time since my departure. But immediately I suppressed its agitation. For some reason my indifference pleased me.

The salt water frothed and foamed. We were entering a great gulf; from out of the fog rose up the jagged rocks of the Isthmus of Corinth. There was Salamis, and there Cape Sunium, where, to this day, are standing the marvellous pillars of the Temple of Pallas.

At times it seemed as though it were all passing before me in a dream.

At ten o'clock in the morning we arrived at the Piræus. I remember how, as a boy, I used to recite with enthusiasm the lines of A. N. Maïkov:

"... Come with me! ...
... Let us go faster! ...
Let us take ship, and fly like a dart,
To Athens, *to marble Piræus!*
There all is different, men and manners!
There among women nought is hid!
There with the men they sing hymns of praise,
There is freedom, leisure, life, and light!"

And we landed at the Piræus. The most prosaic, commercial harbour imaginable. Monstrous iron cruisers, grimy trading steamers blackened by the smoke of coal, counting houses, offices, agencies, and enormous warehouses. Not a shrub, not a blade of grass, not a vestige of a garden on the gloomy desert hillsides. From factory chimneys belch forth black clouds of smoke that float away upon the pale blue Attic sky. Pulleys groan, chains creak, and machines whiz round. This, then, is "marble Piræus."

I engaged a skiff and went ashore. The morning sun was blazing mercilessly. What would it be like in Athens? As I stepped on to the dusty quay, I was filled with despair.

Never in my life had I experienced such heat. It seemed as though some mighty weight were pressing down on my head and

shoulders. My ears buzzed and my knees bent under me. For us northern people there is something savage, something almost terrifying in such a sun. I comprehended that the darts of Helios-Apollo may indeed bear death.

Even in the stifling compartment of the railway train that connects Athens with the Piræus it seemed at least more possible to breathe, though it was no cooler.

At last I reached the dirty, evil-smelling station at Athens.

We were thronged by innumerable guides, reeking unbearably of garlic. Somehow we contrived to escape from them ; I chose none of them to conduct me, to the indignation of them all.

We clambered into a large, shaky conveyance in the nature of a carriage, drawn by a miserable pair of horses. At this time of year (it was the end of May), it is impossible to drive about here in open carriages without incurring a risk of sunstroke.

I felt that if I were at this moment to behold not only the Acropolis, but all the host

of the Olympic deities besides, I should remain entirely unmoved, and, in fact, I should only beg the God who guides the storms to veil that sun.

With much shouting, and beating, and cracking of whips, we at last reached the summit of the hill by a narrow precipitous road. The conveyance stopped. The coachman opened the door, and we alighted.

I looked up, took it all in at a glance, and at once I understood it all—the steps of the Acropolis, the Parthenon, the Propylæa,—and I experienced a sensation such as I shall not forget to my dying day.

My soul was filled wfth the joy of that great deliverance from life, which beauty alone can give. Silly anxiety as to money questions, the unendurable heat, the fatigues of the journey, the recent trivial scepticism, —it was as though all this had never been. And, half unconscious and all distraught, I could only repeat, "Lord, what a work is this!"

Not a soul was about. The guardian opened the gate.

I felt young, alert, and strong as I had never felt before. Under the vertical rays of the sun, we had to ascend the hot, stone stairway, between the heated walls. And it was up these same steps that the Panathenaic festive choirs used to march in procession to the Acropolis.

When the gates closed at my back, I seemed to be leaving behind them all my own past life, all of mankind that had gone before me, twenty whole centuries of sorrow, struggle, and affection, behind and away from the sacred enclosure; and nothing more could mar the harmony and the eternal rest that dominate the place. Something at length in life was found to make that life worth living! How strange it was! As in every great unique contingency of our existence, it seemed to me that I had seen all this before, somewhere and at some time long, long ago, and had not experienced it in books alone. I looked and I remembered. It was all so intimate, so familiar to me. I felt that thus it was inevitably, that otherwise it could not be; and in this feeling was deep joy.

I ascended the steps of the Propylæa and approached the Parthenon, unspeakably beautiful, standing pure, chaste, many-pillared on the pure, pale azure of the midday sky.

I entered and sat down on the steps of the portico, in the shade of a column. Blue sky, blue sea, white marble, and the sun, the cries of birds of prey in the midday height, and the rustling of dry and prickly thorn-shrubs. Something stern there was and austerely divine in this desolation, but nothing sad, no sign of that gloom and that deathlike feeling which weighs upon one in the subterranean brick-built chambers of Nero's palace on the Palatine, or in the ruins of the Coliseum. *There* is the vanished greatness of power overthrown. *Here* is living, eternal Beauty. Here, and here alone, for the first time in my life did I understand what *Beauty* means. I pondered naught, I desired nothing, I grieved not, neither did I rejoice; I was at peace.

A fresh breeze from the sea, charged with free air, breathed purely on my face. And

Time was not; to me this moment had been and was for ever, and would last eternally.

I went all over the Acropolis, the little temple of the goddess Nikè Apteros (Wingless Victory), the Erechtheum with its maiden Caryatids, the Parthenon and Propylæa.

I gaze at the smooth, bare walls of the Propylæa. Can beauty exist, then, even in a plain, bare wall? So delicately polished, so harmoniously disposed are these rectangular or oblong slabs of marble, that even here you feel the mark of the Hellenic genius. The sun's rays seem to pierce the marble through and through, and there is nought that can compare with the soft, blue shadow that falls from the adjacent wall upon the marble surface in the corner.

Here, on a sharp projection, whence I could see the sea and the isle of Salamis, that witness of Hellenic glory, rises the little temple of Victory, which the Greeks named "Wingless," as a sign that it was destined for ever to remain in Athens. The temple of Nikè is minute in its external proportions; it is hardly larger than an ordinary-sized

room in any of our houses. But what symmetry! It is "great in small" indeed. This it is that distinguishes the architecture of the Greeks from that of the Romans or of the Middle Ages. The Romans achieve an external grace by stultifying the proportions of their structures. But beneath their slabs of marble are hidden bricks. The ruins of Roman buildings convey the impression of huge, sombre skeletons. In the Acropolis there is not a single brick. One treads on white marble dust. Fragments of Pentelic stone sparkle and crunch like snow beneath one's feet. Here vision alone is never satisfied. One is impelled as well to touch every surface of the marble, grown yellow with age, golden-gilded, nourished by the rays of the sun, and warm as a living body. One cannot believe that the Parthenon, the Propylæa, the Erechtheum were built by the hand of man; of themselves they sprang from the bosom of the earth, in answer to some law not human, but divine. No chance it is that on the desert hills around and in the plains, no trees or bushes grow. In place of trees,

these snow-white pillars have risen from out of the stone-producing earth, under the torrid sun of Attica, and the ruddy blocks have crowned the crag of the Acropolis. There is no sign of green or vegetation; there is no need of trees.

I carefully examined in the Erechtheum, some fragments of marble covered with fine and complex arabesques. I wanted to discover some slight imperfection of the chisel, some sign of chance neglect. But the closer I inspected, the more closely did I realize that perfection has no limits. In all the details to be admired, in all the marble coils and meanderings, in the branching of the Corinthian leaves, I found the same undeviating, faultless precision, harmony, and judgment, as in the outline of the whole.

And all this seems to have grown up of itself, without an effort, out of the sculptor's hands. The hard, white marble, over which two thousand years have passed, losing none of its beauty beneath the artist's tool, is softer than soft wax, more delicate almost than the unfolding petals of the lily.

Here man has added nothing of his own to Nature. The beauty of the Parthenon and of the Propylæa is but a continuation of the beauty of the sea, the sky, and the stern, sharp outlines of Hymettus and Pentelicon. In northern buildings men flee from Nature, trusting her not; they hide in mysterious darkness, among ogival columns, filtering the sun's rays through many coloured windows, and light dim lamps before the images of martyred saints, drowning the rustle of life in the organ's tones and in sighs of penitence.

"Dies irae, dies illa
Solvet saeclum in favilla."

But here in Hellas man surrenders himself to Nature's sway. He has no wish that any structure should conceal her. In place of a roof to the Parthenon, there is the sky; in among the glistening pillars, is the blue ocean; and everywhere, the sun. There is no corner whence the distance is invisible. The atmosphere, the sun, the sky, the sea,—these are the materials in the architect's hands. The simple, temperate, peaceful

lines of the marble, now perpendicular and now aslant, serve as a limit and a frame, setting that apart in Nature which man counts beautiful or holds to be divine. Transplant the Acropolis to another spot, to another landscape, and no trace will linger of its beauty. Here is the fullest harmony between the works of Nature and those of the hands of men, a harmony that never since has been repeated; the great reunion of these two principles that are eternally opposed, the works of men and the works of the gods. *In harmony with Nature!* This is the basis and the inspiration of all Greek architecture.

In the portico, between two pillars I behold the sea. Had I not seen it formerly? No, *such* a sea I had never seen. From between these pillars it was like the hills and the heavens; and the sunny distance gave it a new meaning of its own—a *Hellenic Expression.* This is no more that practical and utilitarian "surface of the water" upon which ply armed cruisers and modern trading vessels; it is the infinite "thalatta,"

the foaming, azure element whence Venus —Anadiomenè, goddess of beauty, was born.

And so in the Parthenon, as I recalled our own dull, tiresome existence, I thought: We no longer have the art of constructing *in harmony with Nature.* For twenty long centuries past we have departed from her and rejected her. Senseless, powerless mortals! What do we seek? Whither do we wend? What has filled our hearts with this perplexity, this want of faith in Nature, this fear in face of life, in face of death? In our souls is neither heroism nor happiness. We boast of our knowledge, and we lose the human form; we remain as barbarians in the midst of indecent, melancholy luxury, amid the grand, inventive spirit of contemporary science; we have grown wild in our distorted, monstrous cities, these fortresses of stone and iron, piled up to repel the forces of Nature's elements. . . .

Here in the Acropolis alone does one learn to comprehend the significance of the spirit of a mighty and peaceful nation.

All that we laboriously divide with tedium and strife, all that leads us to impossible contradictions, the sky, the earth, nature and mankind, evil and good, all these were united for the ancients in one great harmony. The creation of an artist's hands was the loftiest action, the action of a hero, the highest pinnacle of beauty. This is the double revelation emanating from a single principle—single in the single soul of man.

Must then the problem of our salvation and of the contradiction in our minds and hearts remain unsolved? Has destiny unchangeably decreed that no man may repeat what has been once, that no new Parthenon shall ever rise on earth, built up by a modern Hellene, a god-like man?

I write these lines on an autumn evening, in my room in Petersburg, to the monotonous sound of the wind and rain. Before me on the table lie two small fragments of the actual structure of the Parthenon. The noble

Pentelic marble still sparkles brightly under the lamplight. . . . And I gaze at it with the superstitious love of a pious pilgrim gazing upon some holy relic that he has brought back from a distant land.

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